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L E T T E R

T O

WILLIAM EDEN, Esq;

ON THE SUBJECT OF HIS TO THE

E A R L O F C A R L I S L E;

THE IRISH TRADE.

By RICHARD SHERIDAN, Esq;

Of the City of DUBLIN, BARRISTER at LAW.

*I venture to expose my own weakness, rather than be wanting
at this Time to my country.*

MOLYNEAUX.

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B A R L I S T E R

THE IRISH TRADITION

BY RICHARD SHERIDAN, ESQ.

OF THE CITY OF DUBLIN, BARRISTER AT LAW.

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Molyneux.

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1801

A
L E T T E R
T O

WILLIAM EDEN, Esq.

S I R,

Dublin, December 6, 1779.

I HAVE read your printed letter to Lord Carlisle, on the representations of Ireland respecting a FREE TRADE;—I own, I at first thought it rather ominous, when I saw the name of a late commissioner to America prefixed to a work, the subject of which involves in it a question concerning the RIGHTS OF A PEOPLE.—I find, however, I had little reason to be alarmed; for though you do not seem to possess, like *my* countryman Burke, all the patriot warmth that
glows

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glows for general liberty, yet you do not appear, in the common acceptation of the word, an enemy to this kingdom :—there is something that looks at least like candour in your sentiments ; your style is *gentlemanly* ; and your meaning, where it is not enveloped in words, and obscured by explanation, may, I think, be comprehended. However, I am of opinion, that if you had understood a little the subject you had undertaken to discuss, your pamphlet would have been more compleat. I shall make no apology for this letter, for though your's is addressed to your private friend, and public colleague in negotiation, yet, Sir, as it has been published, and I presume with your approbation, it is now a candidate subject to praise or censure from every individual who may, like you, have “leisure to advert to the “printed accounts of *some occurrences* which “have lately engaged the public attention :” For my own part I rejoice at the opportunity. While men of powerful abilities are exerting every effort in the defence of Ireland's national

tional rights, I am happy to find an object within my capacity on a matter of so much importance; it has ever been my ambition, and where in my power, my endeavour to be of service to my country; consistent with my idea of that service, I think it my duty to declare, without further egotism or introduction of myself to Mr. Eden, that the tenor of, and sentiments contained in his letter to the Earl of Carlisle, OUGHT TO BE REPROBATED IN IRELAND.

You confess in your exordium to your correspondent, that you are *more destitute of competent information*, IF POSSIBLE, than he has *hitherto* found you; how his lordship may have hitherto found you I know not, and therefore shall not infer that you were *totally* unfit for the "*new task*" which you had imposed upon yourself; but, Sir, let this circumstance be as it may, the want of competent information need not have discouraged you. If we may reason by analogy, according to the system established by
your

your patrons, the ministry, incapacity is in no case a disqualification; the confession therefore of this want of *competent information* may not have been in you, Sir, any affectation of modesty, it serves only to anticipate an observation which every one must certainly make upon reading your performance. Neither, Sir, am I surprised at this your confessed want of competent information with regard to the present question; I have said, it relates to "THE RIGHTS OF A PEOPLE," a term which I apprehend has been long banished the circle in which you move, and consequently cannot be there understood. I regret, Mr. Eden, that either from the blunder, or good intentions of governor Johnstone, you were deprived, on your embassy to America, of any conference with her senators; had you been so happy to have had any communication of sentiments with them on the "RIGHTS OF A PEOPLE," you would have received such information that your competency on such a subject could never be questioned, and from the apparent integrity

tegrity of your intentions, all perversion of understanding removed ; I am convinced you would have sacrificed to your information every grace and favor of a court ; but, Sir, agreeable to your present mode of thinking, you have not once in your letter touched upon THE RIGHT of the people of Ireland to a *free trade*. You say “ we should divest ourselves of all prejudices contracted from “ the popular *altercations* of *the day*, that “ it is not the *strict* policy of a former century, or the *accidental* distress of the *present hour* ;” here we have both hour and day, as if our sufferings, borne and growing in “ *this unweeded garden*,” so long undisturbed, had their origin in the *present hour*, or at farthest a post or two before Mr. Eden thought proper to write his letter to lord Carlisle : it is impossible, Sir, with temper to canvas the many terms, phrases, and epithets in your pamphlet, so trifling in themselves and so disrespectful to this injured country ; there are a few of them, however, that it would be criminal to pass over without animadversion ; do you
mean

mean by "*altercations of the day*," the unanimous sense of the people of Ireland? Do you call the *long* and shameful *prohibition* against the natural and just rights of this kingdom "an *accidental* distress of the *present hour*?" and do you stile the persevering, persecuting insolence of your countrymen, "an *imaginary* neglect?" One phrase you use indeed with some degree of justice; our *demands* you define to be "*urgent eagerness*;" be it so. When I admit the truth, I am indifferent to the tautology of the expression: the distress of Ireland you say "*by whatever circumstances occasioned, exists and operates*," "Great-Britain cannot hesitate to give relief, the principal wing of *her* building is in danger." Still, Mr. Eden, you avoid *the claim of right*, and choose rather that barren resource, the BOUNTY of Great-Britain; but you assert "she cannot hesitate to *give* relief." The amazing fortitude of Great Britain is beyond comprehension, she is a very *felo de se* in heroism. The impotent efforts of her courage have almost wearied the arm of America; yet, *Great Britain cannot hesitate to give relief*;
 alas

alas, Sir, you are in this assertion too full of the milk of human kindness. The feelings of your Great Britain are as ludicrous in the judgment of an Irishman, as the blush of Cæsar in the opinion of Cato. You qualify indeed your *generous* assertion, for you add this relief is to be *given*, because it is for "the safety and strength of the great *center edifice*", and you describe Ireland "the principal *wing* of HER *buildings*." I will allow you, Sir, your figure in architecture, and if you please all the ability of a Dutch engineer, you shall dam up the ocean; but I know not where you will find that cement which can make Ireland, being a distinct kingdom, the *wing*, as you express it, of Great Britain's *buildings*.

I fear from the purport of your letter, you view this country as a province to your's; if so, you are one of the worst mediators that could possibly appear; however I cannot help wishing you more success on this occasion, than the result of your embassy to America can give us reason to expect.

The

The idea of conquest has been long since reprobated—the power of supremacy has in fact, though not of right, remained.

When you say “ the distress of Ireland, “ *by whatever circumstances occasioned*, exists “ and operates,” I am inclined to think that ill as you are informed, you are possessed of the knowledge of some latent causes or circumstances occasioning this distress; it would have been candid to have declared them; but as you are silent, I shall take it as admitted that the distresses of Ireland are occasioned by the arbitrary restrictions on her commercial rights, and that “ nothing short “ of a FREE TRADE can give relief.”—— There is but one assertion in this part of your letter which I can admit to be well-founded and indisputable, namely, that our distress “ *exists and operates* ;” confident of its *operation* we can have no doubt of its *existence*.

You tell us, Sir, “ a kind and manly confidence in the equity and wisdom of Great “ Britain

“ Britain should regulate the *expectations of*
 “ *Ireland.*” You freely own “ that the doubts
 “ and difficulties which the first view of the
 “ subject suggests to your mind, are such as
 “ preclude all farther *reasonings* without fur-
 “ ther *information* ;” but in the same page you
 tell us that “ when you state your *reasonings*
 “ you will be *better understood*”.—You say
 the questions to be asked are indeed “ nu-
 “ merous, *nice* and intricate, and that the
 “ whole system of revenue is involved in
 “ the proposition.” You recommend *candid*
recollection, fair and diligent *enquiry*, *caution*,
minute investigation, *much discussion*, and *ma-*
ture deliberation : Now why and wherefore
 all these trappings of language ? why is re-
 collection, which is in its nature involun-
 tary, to be governed by candour ? and why
 shall diligence enquire, caution investigate,
 and deliberation discuss ?—I will answer—Ire-
 land demands what England has no right to
 refuse ; unwilling to comply she would take
 every chance from time, hitherto by no means
 amicable to her interest ; many events may
 happen

happen before recollection can be perfectly candid, before caution can thoroughly investigate the whole minutiae of commerce, and before *mature deliberation* can discuss the *involved system of the revenue*.—Peace may be, no matter on what concessions or conditions, purchased or obtained from Spain and France; Britain, *now* exhausted, will be sufficiently powerful, and then adieu to *fair enquiry* and *candid recollection*; farewell to all the fond hopes and honest expectations of poor deluded Ireland: her only asylum will be, in such case, THE WISDOM AND EQUITY of Great Britain. After deliberation, &c. you proceed with an army of doubts, bringing up many a *perhaps* and *probably* in their rear; and among a variety of novel remarks, as certain as your discovery that where distress exists it operates, you tell us that “political operations must often be influenced by circumstances; and that unadvised measures ought not to be adopted”—it is true,—your stile of reasoning, where certainty appears to demonstration, cannot
be

be disputed; like an arithmetical rule it cannot err; something similar is the advice of Friar Laurence, “wisely and *slow*; they “stumble who run fast;” and this, Mr. Eden, I have, after *mature deliberation, diligent enquiry, and minute investigation*, discovered to be the grand object of your pamphlet. I will not say you wish to confuse one of the most simple and least complicated questions ever agitated; but this I am at liberty to believe, that if your pamphlet is read with approbation, it will have that effect: I will not assert that your intention is for some malicious purpose, to cause *delay* in this country; but this I have a right to declare, that if your reasoning be adopted it will produce *delay*—the adage is in my favour—I think it dangerous. When, Sir, a people are convinced that their rights are withheld, they cannot, if capable, be too sudden in their resolves; and give me leave to remind you, that Ireland is *now* in this situation, that her success depends on expedition; deliberation, discussion and investigation, may
be

be the political motto of your country; I trust, "*carpe diem!*" will be that of mine; but meet our wishes, and you will find this maxim verified by a nation—"the brave
"are always generous."

Considering, Sir, how ill-informed you were of your road, you have ventured to travel a considerable way, though you do not appear to have gained much ground. I shall not attempt to follow you, for you seem to me to be as little acquainted with the place you would go to, as of the road you are to travel; you have been taking the air in a labyrinth of your own creating, and after having tripped over many a path which led to nothing, you at length find yourself at the point from whence you set out.

However, Sir, as your intentions seem to be good, though the effect of your opinion being pursued might be otherwise, I have, in reading your performance, endeavoured to rescue the text from all the prittineffes of
point

point and antithesis, and to free it from a number of barren premises and inconsequent conclusions; the result is, you think, Ireland is distressed and ought to be relieved. But to pronounce upon the cause of that distress, or to point out the mode of relief, requires in your idea so *much precaution*, such *diligent enquiry*, such *candid recollection*, such *minute investigation*, and such *mature deliberation*, that, you doubt, you hesitate, your letter seems the chance medley of your pen, and in the end you give no opinion at all about the matter. To satisfy these doubts, Sir, as well as to 'give you, as far as my endeavours will permit, a little of that information you seem so desirous of obtaining, I flatter myself you will be obliged to me, should I comment upon such passages in your pamphlet as I have already taken notice of, or shall hereafter have occasion to quote.

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In

In the first instance you tell us *a kind and manly confidence in the EQUITY AND WISDOM* of Great Britain should regulate our expectations;—if, Sir, the equity and wisdom of the *people* of Great Britain could afford us any relief, confidence in them might indeed be well placed; but the people of Great Britain have long since forgot to take the management of their *own* affairs into their *own* hands, and I dare say you are one of those who would be very sorry if they were to renew the practice. I am convinced therefore you did not mean the wisdom and equity of the British *people*.—Is it upon those qualities in the British ministry that you wish us to rely?—Now, Sir, much as we respect them, for we, as well as the Americans, are certainly under great obligations to them, yet I think we shall scarcely agree with them in our ideas of *wisdom and equity*.

As to WISDOM, we think a part of it consists in *profiting by experience*,—in this we differ

differ widely from the ministry, and it is because we think it wise to profit by experience, that we do not choose to place any confidence in *ministerial* wisdom. As to EQUITY—I believe it will be found that our notions on this head differ still more widely from their's. We in this country annex certain ideas of distributive justice to the term *equity*—I do not say we are right in doing so, I would not dispute the authority of ministers, I only say the fact is so. Now I have endeavoured to find out the ministerial meaning of the word *equity*, and have for this purpose consulted the British statutes by way of dictionary. I there find that equity means a *monopoly* of trade and of liberty; it means authority without justice, and power without right; it is to treat fellow subjects, whom local circumstances separate from you, and inferiority of numbers place in your power, as the subjects of subjects, or rather as unarmed natural enemies. It is bountiful to suffer us to ex-

ist, and humanely to deprive us of the means of existence; it is to force us to purchase commodities, and to prohibit our earning the purchase money—it is to expect a revenue from the poverty ministers would entail, which could be yielded only by the affluence they would prevent—it is, in short, to say, that as far as your power can reach, liberty, independence, dignity, wealth and commerce shall belong to you exclusively:—dependence, poverty and restrictive laws shall be the portion of all who are connected with you. These, Sir, as far as I could collect from the dictionary I consulted, have been the various *ministerial* meanings of the word *equity* for two centuries back—perhaps it is very well explained there; but this is not exactly the sort of equity in which we can place much confidence.

I shall not object to the next passage I have taken notice of, in which you proceed or attempt to state your reasonings, immediately after having acknowledged that
without

without fuller information you are precluded from all farther reasoning upon the subject:—you might say that this would be carping at a term, that I should consider what the *fact* was, and that no one who was not determined to cavil, could possibly mistake what followed---*for reasoning*.—I admit the *force* of the observation, and shall proceed in my review of some other passages.

You say the questions to be asked relative to the granting of a free trade to Ireland are indeed “ numerous, nice and intricate; “ theoretical deductions will not assist us; “ trading establishments, regulations of commerce, and the whole system of revenue “ are involved in the proposition:” You express your fears at “ reversing the system “ pursued by *wise* statesmen during two “ centuries;” You dread “ the giving “ a sudden shock or precipitate revulsion “ to the course of British trade, commerce and revenue:” And after having “ made some concessions in our favour,

your, they are done away by your observing
 “ that all those theorems of trade, however
 “ plausible they may appear on paper, must
 “ be received subject to *much* previous exa-
 “ mination, and a diligent discussion of all
 “ collateral circumstances ;” that you are
 not “ upon a *sudden outcry*, which like other
 “ commercial complaints may be fallacious or
 “ ill-founded, to make a sudden revolution
 “ in all the practical system of your trade ;
 “ and upon *the spur of a moment* to overturn
 “ a plan of commerce and revenue which
 “ has been the work of ages.”

What, Sir, is it you mean by a *sudden outcry*,
 that may be *fallacious or ill-founded*? Do you
 call, Sir, the unanimous addresses of both
 houses of parliament a *sudden outcry*? Do you
 call the unanimous voice of the whole peo-
 ple of Ireland a *sudden outcry* that may be
fallacious or ill-founded?—Read your statutes,
 Sir, which with a clerk-like care you have
 collected, and seem to have made so little
 use

use of—look at their effects—then tell us--the *outcry* may be *fallacious and ill-founded*. Your want of information, Sir, will not avail you here for your want of respect towards the legislature of Ireland, and the feelings of a whole people.

I ask pardon, Sir, for the warmth into which you have betrayed me ;—perhaps you were not aware of the force of what you said ;—and as you have in most places used a multiplicity of words without saying any thing,—you have here, without knowing it, said a great deal in a few. It must be owned you for the most part shelter yourself under a number of laboured expressions, designed for ornament, and destitute of meaning ;—you would hide the deficiency of your matter in the tinsel of your stile ;—like a shining bubble, gaudy, light and empty, you float upon the surface of a subject, to enter deeply into which seems to require talents more weighty than your's.

You

You have indeed endeavoured to render the questions relative to the granting A FREE TRADE to Ireland, numerous, nice and intricate—you boldly assert that the proposition involves in it the whole system of the British revenue.—I think, Sir, as you disclaim “all hasty inferences and *decisive* assertions,” you might at least have made an attempt at proving one of so much importance as the present. But, Sir, your subsequent arguments, if they tend to any thing, tend to prove that the British revenue has little or nothing to do with the question; and I will undertake to shew that your fears of reversing the system pursued by wise statesmen during two centuries, and of giving a sudden shock or precipitate revulsion to the course of British trade, are equally groundless. This grand question of granting a free trade to Ireland, which you have endeavoured to involve in so many difficulties, is contained in the simplest proposition imaginable

ginable——LET THE REGULATION OF THE IRISH TRADE BE LEFT TO THE WISDOM AND EQUITY OF THE IRISH LEGISLATURE.

A FREE TRADE, Sir, the meaning of which you have affected not to comprehend, is such a trade as FREEMEN ought of right to possess——it is a trade subject to no restrictions in the country to which it belongs, but such, as the inhabitants of that country, being freemen, have through their representatives, consented should take place——

What, Sir, is the meaning of the term FREE COUNTRY?—Your visit to AMERICA may possibly have helped you to comprehend, however unknown to you before:—Is it not, Sir, a country subject to no laws but those to which the inhabitants shall have directly or virtually given their assent? ought not this to have led you to what was meant by a FREE TRADE. Folly itself

itself could never have conceived it to imply, a trade subject to no restrictions, any more than that a free country should be a country subject to no law; when then you call it “an undefined expression” you talk ignorantly—it is an expression as definite and determinate as in the nature of language can exist.—Now, Sir, let us examine what effect the leaving the regulation of the Irish trade to the WISDOM AND EQUITY of the IRISH legislature would have upon the revenue and commerce of Great Britain.

The proposition, as far as it relates to Great Britain, can be considered only in two points of view; first, how far it can effect the British commerce and revenue, with regard to the trade immediately carried on between Great Britain and Ireland; secondly, how far it may interfere with the trade of Great Britain to *foreign* parts.—I shall here, Sir, remark once for all, that
the

the present proposition has no relation whatever to the trade of Great Britain with any of the British settlements or colonies in Asia, Africa or America (I include America only for argument sake)——If Great Britain admits Ireland to a participation of her trade to such settlements or colonies, the Irish will consider it as a favour to which of *right* they have no claim, for which they will not only be grateful, but will be ready to make every equitable compensation in their power; *this*, however, must be a matter of future discussion, and must rest upon the mutual agreements of the parliaments of both kingdoms, and *this* may probably be a matter of *mature deliberation*.

With regard then to the first question before us, the effect a free trade to Ireland will have upon the British revenue immediately resulting from the British trade to Ireland; I conceive, as the produce of
the

the British colonies and settlements is left totally out of the question, there is but one inconvenience to Great Britain which can possibly arise.

You have remarked, Sir, that though Ireland has at all times had full liberty to *manufacture goods for her own consumption*; wonderful favour! generous indulgence! Was there no *mature deliberation*, no *minute investigation*, in British councils, that *this* liberty has so long existed?

But though Ireland, you say, has had this liberty, the consumers have hitherto found it easier to purchase from England many articles both of luxury and convenience than to make them at home;——the effect then of a free exportation of Irish manufactures to foreign countries would, probably, be a considerable improvement in their quality and workmanship, so that the Irish consumer would no longer be
induced

induced to purchase similar manufactures from England—the value of the exports of which to Ireland would be in that case a net loss to Great Britain—agreed.—I will admit this to be one of the consequences of freedom of trade to Ireland—I will not advantage myself by assertion and say there is no justice in the observation, and that it should not hold—I will allow it to go much further in theory than I am convinced it will in practice-----what then?---is it only a *free trade* that can be productive of such consequences, and are these necessarily *prevented* by depriving us of it?—do they not already exist to their utmost extent, although we have no free trade? have not our *non-importation* agreements already produced in this respect the very effects which you might apprehend from granting Ireland a free trade?—it is, therefore, fair to conclude, that as far as relates to the commerce immediately carried on between the two kingdoms,

doms, *no additional loss or inconvenience could result to Great Britain from the grant.*

Now, Sir, as these *non-importation* agreements were founded in necessity, not choice; as they were entered into in order to give employment to thousands of starving manufacturers, the probability is, that as soon as we can find sufficient sale in foreign markets for our manufactures, to keep our *manufacturers* fully employed, we shall again resort to England for such commodities, as from the infant state of many of our manufactures, it will require much time before they can be brought to any equal degree of perfection in this country; so that, far from being detrimental to Great Britain, it is by means *only* of allowing a free trade to Ireland, that Great Britain can ever hope to recover the advantages she formerly derived from her commerce with this kingdom.

With

With regard to the second question, how far freedom of trade to Ireland may interfere with the trade of Great Britain to *foreign* parts, I shall only quote on the occasion a few passages from your pamphlet, which, from a comparative view with the rest of your letter, I should think had been quotations made by you:—"It is now well understood that the flourishing of neighbouring nations in their trade is to our advantage; and that if we could extinguish their industry and manufactures, our own would languish;—if we are capable of looking beyond the extent of a single, shopboard, *we cannot consider the Irish as rivals in interest*, even though they should become *our associates in lucrative pursuits*.

"Sir Matthew Decker (who wrote upon some points with singular ability) was clearly of opinion that the restraints on the Irish woollen contributed in their effects to diminish the foreign trade of
"Great

“ Great Britain,” and finally, “ it seems demonstrable, that the export of native manufactured commodities from any one part of the king’s dominions, must be advantageous to the whole, wherever the burdens and duties are so regulated as to leave no exclusive advantage; for that again would operate as a monopoly.”

Now, Sir, what is become of that chain of difficulties with which you endeavoured to inclose the question? How is the whole system of the British revenue involved in it? —Where is the necessity for all that delay, caution, deliberation, and mature discussion upon which you descant so much?

I think, Sir, it is evident that this question, which according to you, is of a nature so very intricate and difficult, may be reduced to a very narrow compass. —The demand of Ireland for a free trade, means nothing more than that all commercial regulations

in

in Ireland should be left to the wisdom and equity of the Irish legislature:—This would effect England only in two ways; first, it might her exports to Ireland. Secondly, it might interfere with her trade with foreign powers. As to the first of these, I have shewn that our NON-IMPORTATION agreements, in their operations, are already productive of the same effects to a greater extent.

As to the second, you have yourself furnished very good arguments to prove that the apprehensions of England on that account are groundless.

With regard to any participation of trade, that Great Britain may think proper to allow to Ireland, I have already said, that this forms no part of the demand of Ireland for a free trade, but is a point which must be referred to future discussion; probably the best means of settling

ting it, would be to appoint deputations from the parliaments of both kingdoms, who should determine upon the concessions to be made by *both*, and upon the commercial regulations to be established for the common benefit of the whole empire.

I have hitherto, in speaking of the subject of the Irish free trade, used *your* expressions, that it should be *allowed, given, or granted* by Great Britain.—I have done this merely to comply with the usual stile of speech upon the occasion; but had you condescended to visit this country, before you ventured to write upon it, you would have seen, from the present situation and spirit of the people, that, to talk of an English parliament *allowing* a kingdom possessed of a complete legislature within herself, the *use* of her *own* ports—to talk of the representatives of the freeholders of England

land, *giving leave* to the people of Ireland, who acknowledge no such authority, to export their own manufactures, or to import such merchandize as they shall think proper to import——I say, Sir, that had you condescended to visit this country, you would have perceived, that to talk thus is to talk *idly*.

A free trade, such as I have defined it to be, the people of Ireland do not ask of Great Britain as a *favour*, they demand it as a *right*——they conceive that no power upon earth, excepting their own legislature, consisting of the king, lords and commons of Ireland, possess a right to shut up their ports.——When they demand a free trade, they do not address the English parliament in their legislative capacity to repeal restrictive laws;—they address you as a neighbouring nation, to disavow *an odious usurpation*, equally impolitic and unjust, to disclaim not

C 2

laws

laws but arbitrary illegal determinations, which nothing but your being possessed of a fleet, and our want of one, could have inspired you with the injustice to maintain.

We would request our sovereign, the king of Ireland, that he would not suffer certain vessels belonging to his Britannic majesty, (commonly called revenue cutters) to board, in a piratical manner, the ships belonging to Irish subjects; for, when such cutters, under pretence of searching for goods, the exportation of which from Ireland is prohibited only by the arbitrary resolves of the British parliament, and not by any *Irish law*, such vessels act *without law*, and are therefore pirates.

This doctrine may appear new to you, Sir, but it would be prudent in your patrons to recollect, that it is a doctrine,
adopted

adopted by three millions of people.—
 When you speak then, of Ireland's being “ a jewel in the British crown,” you seem to forget that Ireland has a diadem of her own——plundered indeed it may have been by the usurped power of a foreign legislature; but, stripped and unadorned as it is, it can still confer power and dignity on the wearer.
 ——The HONOUR, Sir, of this diadem, is now guarded by **FIFTY THOUSAND ARMED FREEMEN.**

RICHARD SHERIDAN.